

Original Article

No Laughing Matter: The Moderating Role of Gender Stereotypes in Humorous Political Attack Advertisements

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Abstract: Political attack advertisements are a powerful tool used by politicians and campaigns to launch personal criticisms against opposing candidates or political parties. Humor has emerged as a powerful tool in contemporary political communication, making political messages more accessible and influencing emotional responses. However, the landscape of political communication is deeply shaped by pervasive gender stereotypes, which are harmful because they constrain individuals' capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue professional careers, or make autonomous life choices. The media, a primary conduit of political communication, frequently reinforces these unrealistic and limiting perceptions of gender. Women are often underrepresented, and both genders are often depicted in stereotypical ways. This study addressed the moderating role of gender stereotypes in humorous political attack advertisements. The academic understanding of humor is multifaceted, often explained through three primary theoretical lenses: Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, and Relief Theory. Humor plays a significant role in political communication, making messages more accessible and distracting audiences from the true purpose of attacks. However, its effectiveness is highly subjective and context-dependent, with its effectiveness decreasing when it violates audience expectations. Understanding these theories is essential for successful political humor and political campaigns. Gendered humor in political campaigns, particularly in attack advertisements, can lead to backlash against the attacker, especially when male candidates use gender stereotypes against female opponents. This is particularly pronounced among voters concerned about gender discrimination. Even implicit attacks can still trigger voters' underlying qualms about women in politics. Female politicians are already subjected to heightened scrutiny and pre-existing stereotypes, which are amplified when they seek or hold public office. Attacks against them often disproportionately focus on their appearance, emotional state, or personal life, rather than their policy positions or political competence. This Study explored the role of gender stereotypes in humorous political attack advertisements, highlighting the risk of backlash for attacking parties. The Role Congruity Theory and Expectancy Violation Theory provide frameworks for understanding why female politicians are uniquely vulnerable to gendered humorous attacks. The "just a joke" phenomenon highlights the normalization of sexism in politics, which allows discriminatory content to be presented and accepted as socially permissible. This highlights the urgent need for interventions that address both the production and reception of such humor to break this reinforcing cycle.

Keywords: Humor, Political attack, powerful tool, politic, political communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Political campaigns frequently employ various communication strategies to sway public opinion and secure electoral victories [1]. Among the most potent and controversial of these strategies are political

attack advertisements. These advertisements are specifically crafted to launch personal criticisms against an opposing candidate or political party, often forming an integral part of broader negative campaigning or smear campaigns [2]. Historically, attack advertisements have been a prominent feature in political contests, with their widespread dissemination often facilitated by mass media in well-financed campaigns. Their strategic aims are multifaceted, ranging from character assassination—seeking to alter public perception of a candidate's personal integrity—to policy critiques, which aim to undermine support by portraying an opponent's ideas as illogical, extreme, or ineffective. The earliest documented use of onscreen attack advertisements in the United States dates back to the 1934 California gubernatorial election, demonstrating their long-standing presence in political discourse. Iconic examples, such as the "Daisy" ad used by Lyndon B. Johnson against Barry Goldwater in 1964, and the "Willie Horton" ad deployed by George H. W. Bush in 1988, underscore their historical impact and strategic significance. In contemporary political communication, humor has emerged as an increasingly prevalent and powerful tool. Politicians and campaigns utilize humor for diverse strategic purposes, including defining political concepts, disarming critics, establishing a sense of rapport, expressing opposition, signaling political identification, and fostering civic support for various causes. The strategic deployment of humor can render political messages more accessible to audiences, making them more receptive to information they might otherwise resist [3]. Furthermore, humor has been shown to enhance the memorability of political information and increase the likelihood of its sharing among individuals. Beyond cognitive effects, humor can profoundly influence emotional responses, elicit positive emotions such as mirth and amusement while simultaneously reduce negative feelings like anxiety or fear. This emotional modulation can humanize politicians, fostering stronger connections with their audiences, and ultimately influencing candidate likeability and vote probability. The perception of a candidate as "funny" can even lead to positive stereotypical associations, such as perceptions of extraversion or intelligence. Despite the strategic advantages offered by humor and the established efficacy of attack advertisements, the landscape of political communication is profoundly shaped by pervasive gender stereotypes. A gender stereotype represents a generalized view or preconception about the attributes, characteristics, or roles that are traditionally associated with, or expected of, women and men. These stereotypes, whether overtly hostile (e.g., "women are irrational") or seemingly benign (e.g., "women are nurturing"), are inherently harmful because they constrain individuals' capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue professional careers, or make autonomous life choices, thereby perpetuating systemic inequalities. Media, a primary conduit of political communication, frequently reinforces these unrealistic and limiting perceptions of gender. Women are often underrepresented, implicitly suggesting that men constitute the cultural norm and women are less significant or even invisible. Both genders are frequently portrayed in stereotypical ways, with men often depicted as active, adventurous, powerful, and sexually aggressive, while women are often cast as passive, dependent, focused on appearance, or primarily engaged in caregiving roles. In the political arena, these deeply ingrained stereotypes often penalize women, particularly when they aspire to positions of power that deviate from traditional gender roles [4]. Female candidates and experts are frequently evaluated less favorably than equally qualified men, facing heightened skepticism regarding their competence and authority. The central problem addressed by this study is the moderating role of gender stereotypes in humorous political attack advertisements. While humor can generally mitigate backlash for the attacker and enhance message reception, its application in gendered contexts, particularly when targeting women, introduces distinct and often detrimental effects. Understanding how the persuasive power of humor interacts with and is shaped by these pre-existing gender stereotypes is a critical area requiring deeper investigation. The significance of this study lied in its contribution to political communication theory, offering nuanced understandings of the complex interplay of humor, gender, and persuasion. It also provides practical implications for political campaigns seeking to employ humor effectively and for media literacy initiatives aiming to counter harmful stereotyping in public discourse.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The academic understanding of humor is multifaceted, often explained through three primary theoretical lenses: Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, and Relief Theory. Incongruity Theory posits that humor arises from the perception of something unexpected, out of context, or illogical, with amusement stemming from the subsequent resolution of this perceived mismatch. This theory suggests that humor is evoked when an audience's understanding abruptly shifts from a primary, more obvious interpretation to a secondary, opposing one, often triggered by a punchline. Superiority Theory, conversely, argues that humor derives from feelings of superiority over the object of amusement, frequently involving ridicule, mockery, or derision. This perspective implies a power dynamic where the individual experiencing humor feels elevated by another's misfortune or perceived inferiority. Finally, Relief Theory, notably associated with Sigmund Freud, proposes that humor serves as a release of pent-up psychological tension, enabling individuals to confront fears or overcome inhibitions. This theory views humor as a "safety valve" that provides a cathartic outlet for suppressed emotions or societal anxieties. humor's influence extends significantly to message processing, candidate likeability, and memory in political communication. It can render political messages more accessible, making audiences more amenable to judgments they might otherwise be unwilling to accept. Furthermore, humor has the potential to distract the audience from the true purpose of an attack, thereby reducing its perceived harshness. Beyond these immediate effects, humor increases the likelihood of sharing political information and enhances the retention of that information. It boosts candidate likeability and vote probability by eliciting positive emotions such as mirth and amusement, while simultaneously reducing negative emotional states like anxiety or fear. This humanizing effect helps politicians connect with their audiences, leading to more positive evaluations and increased voter support. The perception of a candidate as humorous can also foster positive stereotypical associations, such as being seen as extraverted or intelligent. The capacity of humor to make messages "more accessible" and "distract the audience from the true purpose of the attacker" suggests that humor can act as a cognitive bypass mechanism. When humor is present, audiences may engage in less critical cognitive processing of the message's substantive content or its underlying negative intent. This "cognitive bypass" effect can be a powerful tool for delivering controversial or otherwise unpalatable attack messages, as it lowers the audience's natural defenses. The implication is that humor can function as a subtle form of persuasion, making voters more susceptible to information they might otherwise reject if presented in a serious, direct manner. However, the application of humor in political campaigns is a double-edged sword. While it generally increases likeability and vote probability for candidates, its effectiveness is highly subjective and context-dependent. When humor is perceived as inappropriate or violates audience expectations, it can significantly decrease a candidate's credibility. This dynamic aligns with Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT). If the humorous deviation from expected behavior (e.g., a politician being unexpectedly funny) is positively received, it enhances the candidate's appeal. Conversely, if the violation is perceived negatively, it can backfire. This suggests that successful political humor necessitates a profound understanding of audience expectations and prevailing social norms, particularly when addressing sensitive topics or engaging in attacks.

Table 01: Key Theories of Humor and Their Relevance to Political Advertising

Theory Name	Core Principle	Application in Political Advertising	Relevant Snippet IDs
Incongruity	Humor arises from perceived mismatch/resolution of unexpected elements.	Used to create unexpected twists or absurd portrayals in attacks, generating amusement and making messages memorable.	
Superiority	Humor stems from feelings of superiority over the object of amusement.	Employed in "other-deprecatory humor" to ridicule opponents, elevate the attacker, and diminish the target.	

Relief	Humor is a release of pent-up psychological tension.	Can alleviate audience anxiety about political issues or the harshness of an attack, providing catharsis.	
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This table provides a structured overview of the foundational psychological theories of humor, explicitly linking their core tenets to the mechanisms by which humorous political advertisements operate. Understanding Superiority Theory, for instance, helps explain why "other-deprecatory humor" is employed to create a sense of superiority for the attacker and inferiority for the target. Similarly, Incongruity Theory elucidates how unexpected or absurd portrayals in attack ads can generate amusement and enhance message recall [5]. This structured presentation enhances the academic rigor and accessibility of the theoretical discussion, providing a clear framework for the subsequent analysis.

Gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained societal preconceptions that define the attributes, characteristics, and roles believed to be possessed or performed by women and men. These stereotypes, whether overtly discriminatory or subtly benign, are inherently detrimental as they restrict individuals' potential, limit career choices, and perpetuate systemic inequalities. For example, the stereotype of women as primarily caregivers often lead to childcare responsibilities falling disproportionately on them, hindering their professional advancement. When compounded with other intersecting stereotypes (e.g., related to race, disability, or socioeconomic status), their negative impact on certain groups of women can be even more severe. The practice of ascribing specific attributes to individuals solely based on their gender is a form of gender stereotyping, and it becomes wrongful when it infringes upon human rights and fundamental freedoms. Media plays a significant role in the perpetuation of these stereotypes, often presenting unrealistic and limiting images of both sexes. Women are frequently underrepresented, which implicitly suggests that men are the universal standard and women are either unimportant or invisible. This distortion is evident across various media forms, from prime-time television to newscasts, where men consistently outnumber women in portrayals and coverage. Both men and women are depicted in stereotypical ways that reinforce socially endorsed views of gender. Men are typically portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful, and sexually aggressive, often uninvolved in domestic or relational spheres. Conversely, women are frequently depicted as sex objects—young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent, and sometimes even incompetent or unintelligent, with their primary energies devoted to appearance and caregiving. Media narratives often emphasize traditional gender roles, such as women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners, and can even normalize violence against women by portraying them as victims or sex objects and men as aggressors.

Two prominent theoretical lenses provide crucial insights into the impact of gender stereotypes in political communication: Role Congruity Theory and Expectancy Violation Theory []. Role Congruity Theory (RCT) posits that prejudice against female leaders arises from a perceived incongruity between the traditional female gender role (characterized by traits like nurturing and compassion) and the demands of leadership roles (often associated with masculine traits like toughness and assertiveness). This perceived mismatch leads to women being evaluated less favorably than men as potential leaders and facing greater obstacles in achieving success in leadership positions. For example, women experts are often rewarded less for their expertise and penalized more severely for any perceived lack thereof, exacerbating existing gender biases [6]. This bias persists across both masculine- and feminine-stereotyped issues, implying that the very act of a woman claiming expert authority can be seen as a violation of traditional gender roles, potentially undermining her credibility and persuasiveness. Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) analyzes how individuals react to unexpected deviations from social norms and expectations. The nature of the reaction—whether positive or negative—depends on various factors, including the relationship with the violator and the favorability of the perceived violation. In political contexts, EVT suggests that when a politician deviates from expected behaviors (e.g., by using humor in a serious setting), this can trigger cognitive appraisals. If the violation elicits positive emotions or is favorably interpreted, it can be beneficial for the candidate. Conversely, if it is perceived negatively, it can decrease attraction or credibility. Factors such as gender, culture, and age significantly influence these expectations and subsequent reactions. Gender

stereotypes profoundly impact the perceptions and credibility of female candidates. They can increase negative perceptions, potentially diminishing a woman's chances of being elected. Voters may penalize female candidates for not exhibiting the "masculine" personality traits often desired in high office, while male candidates are often perceived as inherently more competent. Female politicians frequently face higher standards and harsher evaluations compared to their male counterparts [8]. Media coverage of women in politics often disproportionately focuses on their appearance and personal lives, and tends to provide more negative viability coverage than for men. Women are frequently stereotyped as being more competent on "women's issues" like education and healthcare, but weaker on "masculine" issues such as the economy or military. However, it is also observed that some voters perceive women as more trustworthy, less corrupt, and more compassionate. Female politicians face a persistent "double bind" in political communication. This refers to the paradoxical situation where displaying traditionally masculine leadership traits (e.g., assertiveness, toughness) can lead to backlash for violating gender norms, while adhering to feminine traits (e.g., warmth, empathy) can result in perceptions of incompetence or a lack of authority. This dynamic arises from the incongruity between societal expectations for women and the prevailing expectations for political leaders. It means that women are often judged negatively regardless of whether they conform to or defy traditional gender stereotypes, highlighting that societal expectations for leaders remain heavily gendered. This phenomenon has significant implications for female representation and the types of issues women are perceived as competent to address. Furthermore, voters are more inclined to rely on gender stereotypes in low-information environments, such as primary elections where partisan cues are less salient. Campaign communication, including attack advertisements, can explicitly or implicitly activate these latent stereotypes. This suggests a cognitive heuristic at play: when detailed information about candidates is scarce, voters often revert to easily accessible, pre-existing mental shortcuts, which include gender stereotypes. The causal relationship here is that a lack of information combined with the activation of stereotypes increases reliance on gender stereotypes in voter evaluation. This implies that even subtle gendered cues in humorous attack ads can have a disproportionate impact in specific electoral contexts, shaping perceptions beyond the explicit message content.

Table 02: Common Gender Stereotypes in Political Media and Their Perceived Impact

Stereotype Dimension	Traditional Gender Association	Perceived Impact on Female Candidates	Perceived Impact on Male Candidates	Relevant Snippet IDs
Warmth/Nurturing	Female	Seen as empathetic, compassionate; can be perceived as less competent for "tough" issues.	Less emphasized, but can humanize; not typically a primary leadership trait.	
Competence/Expertise	Male	Evaluated less positively, rewarded less for expertise, punished more for lack thereof.	Expected to be competent, rewarded for expertise.	
Emotionality	Female	Portrayed as unstable, irrational; penalized for displaying negative emotions.	Less scrutinized for emotional displays; often seen as passionate or strong.	

Toughness/Aggressiveness	Male	Can lead to "backlash" for violating feminine norms; perceived as "too masculine."	Expected and rewarded; associated with strong leadership.	
Appearance/Personal Life	Female	Disproportionately scrutinized; focus shifts from policy to physical attributes.	Less focus on appearance; personal life less central to public evaluation.	

This table systematically illustrates the specific ways gender stereotypes manifest in political communication and their differential impact on male and female candidates. It visually encapsulates the "double bind" and other challenges women face, such as being evaluated less positively for expertise or having their appearance scrutinized [9]. This clear categorization aids in comprehending the complex perceptual biases at play, which is fundamental to analyzing the moderating role of gender in humorous attack advertisements. The intersection of humor and gender stereotypes in political attack advertisements presents a complex dynamic, where the generally positive effects of humor can be significantly altered or even reversed. This section delves into how gender stereotypes specifically moderate the reception and impact of humorous political attacks, exploring the potential for backlash and the mechanisms of sexism's normalization. The involvement of humor in sexist advertising has been shown to have a negative impact on both the perception of the advertisement itself and consumers' intention to engage with the advertised product or message. The direction of sexism—whether it is directed against women or men—becomes particularly significant when paired with humor. This finding suggests that humor is not a universal panacea for negative or controversial content; rather, it can be detrimental, especially when combined with sexist material. Conversely, study indicated that humor in advertising can influence how gender stereotypes are perceived and can even improve consumer attitudes, particularly if it utilizes *nontraditional* stereotypes instead of reinforcing conventional ones. In contrast, traditional male stereotypes are more prevalent in humorous advertisements, while traditional female stereotypes tend to appear more frequently in non-humorous ads. The influence of humor in stereotyped advertising appears to affect women more than men; women tend to evaluate gender portrayals more favorably and perceive them as more credible in humorous ads when nontraditional stereotyping is employed. The observation that humor's positive effects on message reception and attitude are significantly diminished or reversed when combined with sexist content, particularly when traditional gender stereotypes are reinforced, suggests a critical dynamic. This indicates that the *type* of humor employed and the *nature* of the stereotype being invoked are crucial determinants of its efficacy. When humor aligns with and amplifies harmful, traditional stereotypes, it appears to lose its typical function as a social lubricant. Instead, it transforms into a tool for reinforcing prejudice, leading to negative audience reactions. This implies that political campaigns must exercise extreme caution when using humor that touches upon gender, as it can easily backfire if perceived as sexist or as reinforcing outdated social norms. Furthermore, the finding that women are more sensitive to and influenced by gender portrayals in humorous advertisements, especially responding positively to non-traditional stereotyping, points to a gender-specific processing mechanism. This suggests that female audiences may be more attuned to, and potentially more critical of, gendered content in advertisements [10]. Their positive response to humor appears contingent on it challenging, rather than reinforcing, limiting stereotypes. This highlights that effective humorous political advertising, particularly when gender is a salient factor, requires a nuanced understanding of how different demographic groups, such as male versus female voters, interpret and react to gendered cues within humorous contexts. The use of gendered humor in political campaigns, especially in attack advertisements, carries significant risks, frequently leading to backlash against the attacker. Studies show that when male candidates employ gender stereotypes, whether implicitly or explicitly, in attack

ads against female opponents, it often backfires, resulting in increased support for the female opponent. This adverse reaction is particularly pronounced among voters who express high concern about gender discrimination. Even implicit attacks, which subtly activate stereotypes without overtly violating principles of equality, can still trigger voters' underlying qualms about women in politics [11]. While humor generally functions to reduce backlash for the attacker in a broad sense, when gender stereotypes are involved, the attacking male candidate faces considerable risk. Female politicians are already subjected to heightened scrutiny and pre-existing stereotypes, which are amplified when they seek or hold public office. They are frequently portrayed as inherently unfit for political roles. Attacks against them often disproportionately focus on their appearance, emotional state, or personal life, rather than their policy positions or political competence. The observation that humor generally mitigates backlash for the attacker but that gender-stereotyped attacks by men against women frequently backfire presents a compelling paradox. This apparent contradiction suggests that societal sensitivity to gender discrimination acts as a powerful counter-moderator. Voters, particularly those with strong predispositions towards gender equality, perceive such attacks as violating fundamental social norms of civility and fairness, thereby triggering a negative reaction against the attacker. This indicates that humor's typical "social lubricant" effect is highly conditional and can become counterproductive when it engages with deeply ingrained societal biases like sexism, especially when originating from a position of perceived male privilege [12]. The case studies of attacks on Dilma Rousseff, Hillary Clinton, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez provide compelling evidence that gendered humor in politics often functions to dehumanize and delegitimize female politicians. These attacks consistently shift the focus from policy and competence to appearance, emotionality, and even sexual objectification. This pattern indicates that gendered humor serves to undermine women in power by reducing them to their stereotypical gendered attributes. This mechanism exploits existing gender biases to create an incongruity between the serious, authoritative role of a politician and the trivializing, often sexualized, portrayal. The broader implication is that gendered humorous attacks are not merely about discrediting an opponent but are also instrumental in reinforcing patriarchal power structures and discouraging women's political participation by fostering a hostile public environment.

Table 03: Examples of Gendered Humorous Political Attacks and Their Outcomes

Targeted Politician	Attacker/Source	Nature of Humorous Attack	Gender Stereotype Leveraged	Observed Outcome/Impact	Relevant Snippet IDs
Dilma Rousseff	Opponents, social media	Cruel, sexual, prejudicial memes/jokes; car sticker depicting denigrating sexual position.	"Unstable, crazy, hysterical woman," focus on image/body over policy, sexual objectification.	Escalated to harassment, questioned competence, UN Women Brazil condemnation, undermined legitimacy.	
Hillary Clinton	Media, Opponents	Comments on fashion choices and appearance.	Focus on superficiality, distraction from political proposals.	Shifted focus from policy to personal, contributed to negative perceptions.	
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	Fox News representative, Online comments	Violent comments, "needs to get pregnant to	Incompetent professional, overly emotional, traditional	Dismissed productive political discussion, reinforced	

		further career."	expectations of women.	traditional gender roles, subjected to rhetorical gender violence.	
Women's Suffragettes	Satirical Caricature Artists (e.g., Currier & Ives)	Caricatures like "The Age of Brass" (1869), "Women Voting in New Jersey" (1877).	"Man-Tamer," "Miss Hangman," domineering, irrational, chaotic, overly emotional.	Portrayed women as a threat to traditional gender roles, reinforced negative views of women in politics.	
Donald Trump	Himself (Access Hollywood tape)	"Grab 'em by the pussy" comment.	Dismissed as "locker room talk," normalization of sexist remarks.	Attempted normalization of misogynistic behavior as "just a joke" in a political context.	

This table provides concrete, illustrative examples that ground the theoretical discussion in real-world political communication. By showcasing various instances of gendered humorous attacks and their diverse outcomes, it demonstrates the complex and often harmful ways gender stereotypes operate within political humor [13]. This comparative analysis of different attack types and their effects reinforces the argument that these phenomena are indeed "no laughing matter" and highlights their pervasive nature across different political contexts and time periods. Sexist humor plays a significant role in creating a social context that justifies and normalizes the expression of prejudice against women. According to Prejudiced Norm Theory, sexist humor activates a "humor mindset," or a conversational rule of levity, which encourages individuals to shift from a usual literal, serious mindset to a non-critical one that trivializes the subject matter. This mechanism makes discrimination appear harmless and acceptable. Studies have demonstrated that men with hostile sexist attitudes are more likely to express beliefs that justify the gender status quo after exposure to sexist humor. Furthermore, the absence of a negative reaction, or the presence of a positive reaction such as canned laughter, following a sexist joke can normalize degrading attitudes toward a target group. The "just a joke" phenomenon is a critical aspect of this normalization, allowing for the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes under the guise of innocuous entertainment. This framing often serves to deflect responsibility for politically incorrect content. Even "meta-disparagement humor," which purports to ridicule the bigot, frequently explicitly resurrects and reinforces the very sexist stereotypes it claims to critique. The inherent ambiguity of such humor can make it unclear whether the audience is laughing at the sexism or with it, potentially leading to the activation and internalization of stereotypes. The consequences are far-reaching: sexist humor can reinforce negative perceptions of women, contribute to internalized sexism, and has even been linked to the acceptance of rape myths. It can also undermine sympathy for women's rights and dismiss their concerns as undeserving of serious consideration. The process by which sexist humor, under the guise of "just a joke," creates a social context where prejudice against women becomes more acceptable and less critically examined is a concerning dynamic. This process desensitizes audiences to harmful content, making them less likely to perceive it as sexist or to challenge the existing power structures. Prejudiced Norm Theory explains this by positing that humor activates a "levity rule", shifting the audience into a non-critical mindset. This allows the explicit invocation of stereotypes to pass without censure, even if the humor's stated intent is ironic. The causal pathway is clear: sexist humor leads to a humor mindset, which in turn reduces critical processing, ultimately resulting in the normalization of prejudice [14]. This indicates that even if a politician does not *intend* to be sexist, the use of gendered humor can have the *effect* of normalizing sexist attitudes among the audience, particularly among those already predisposed to such views. This poses a significant ethical challenge

for political communicators. moreover, certain forms of gendered humor, particularly those identified as "male-inflicted punishment" or "virility battle" humor, serve to actively reproduce and strengthen existing power and gender hierarchies. This is notably observed within populist radical right political communication [15]. This goes beyond mere normalization to active perpetuation. Such humor, often aggressive or disparaging, leverages the principles of Superiority Theory to elevate the attacker or the ingroup while diminishing the target or outgroup, particularly women or gender minorities. This indicates that gendered political humor is not merely a communication tactic but can function as a tool for social and ideological control, actively shaping and reinforcing societal norms around gender and power. This makes it a serious concern for those who are targeted and for the broader health of democratic discourse.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the findings from the literature review, drawing connections across different theoretical perspectives and empirical observations to illuminate the complex moderating role of gender stereotypes in humorous political attack advertisements. Humor, in its general application, has demonstrated considerable utility in political communication. It enhances message accessibility, increases candidate likeability, improves information recall, and can even reduce the risk of backlash for the attacking party [16]. These benefits stem from humor's capacity to elicit positive emotions and foster a sense of connection with the audience. However, the analysis presented herein reveals that these advantageous effects are significantly moderated, and often negated, by the presence of gender stereotypes. When gender stereotypes are explicitly or implicitly invoked in humorous political attacks, particularly by male candidates targeting female opponents, the typically positive effects of humor are frequently reversed, leading to a backlash against the attacker. This phenomenon is especially pronounced among segments of the electorate sensitive to issues of gender discrimination. This observation suggests that while humor can generally disarm critics and make messages more palatable, its effectiveness is highly conditional on the content it frames. When humor is used to perpetuate or activate harmful gender stereotypes, it crosses a line that many voters, particularly those with egalitarian values, find unacceptable, turning what might otherwise be a strategic advantage into a liability. Role Congruity Theory and Expectancy Violation Theory provide robust frameworks for understanding why female politicians are uniquely vulnerable to gendered humorous attacks [17]. Role Congruity Theory explains that the perceived incongruity between traditional feminine traits (e.g., nurturing, emotional) and leadership roles (e.g., tough, decisive) creates a "double bind" for women in politics. Humor that reinforces these traditional feminine roles can undermine a female candidate's perceived competence, while humor that highlights "masculine" traits can lead to a different form of backlash for violating gendered expectations. Expectancy Violation Theory further clarifies that deviations from expected behaviors—such as a female politician being portrayed in a way that reinforces negative stereotypes or, conversely, being "too" assertive—can be perceived negatively if these violations align with harmful preconceptions [18]. The violation of expectations regarding a female politician's demeanor or role, especially when it plays into existing biases, can significantly diminish her credibility and public support. The "just a joke" phenomenon, underpinned by Prejudiced Norm Theory, highlights a more insidious consequence of gendered humor in politics: the normalization of sexism. This mechanism allows discriminatory content to be presented and accepted as socially permissible, thereby desensitizing audiences to its harmful implications. This normalization is particularly evident in the consistent shift of focus from a female politician's policy positions or qualifications to her personal appearance, emotional state, or domestic life when she is targeted by gendered humor [19]. The subtle yet pervasive nature of this process contributes to a culture where gender-based attacks are trivialized, making it more challenging to address and counteract systemic biases in political discourse. The conditional efficacy of humor in gendered contexts is a critical takeaway. Humor that typically serves to humanize and connect can be weaponized in gendered political attacks to dehumanize and delegitimize female politicians [20]. This represents a perversion of

a generally positive communication tool for a negative, discriminatory purpose. The underlying mechanism is that humor, by lowering cognitive defenses, allows for the insertion of deeply prejudiced content that might otherwise be rejected if presented in a serious, direct manner. This indicates that the "moderating role" of gender stereotypes is not merely about influencing reception; it transforms humor from a benign or beneficial tool into a potent instrument of gender-based political violence, making it a critical area for media literacy and ethical communication guidelines. Furthermore, the normalization of sexism through humor creates a self-perpetuating cycle. The social acceptance of such humor, explained by Prejudiced Norm Theory, reinforces existing gender stereotypes, which in turn makes future sexist humor more readily accepted [21]. This establishes a feedback loop that perpetuates a cycle of inequality. The causal chain is clear: sexist humor leads to perceived social acceptability, which reinforces stereotypes, and subsequently increases tolerance for future sexist humor. This implies that the seemingly innocuous "just a joke" contributes to a systemic problem, making it more difficult to challenge gender inequality in politics and beyond. This highlights the urgent need for interventions that address both the production and reception of such humor to break this reinforcing cycle. For male candidates, employing gender-stereotyped humor in attack advertisements is demonstrably a "risky business". Such a strategy is highly likely to backfire, particularly in primary elections where partisan cues are less dominant, or among voters who are ideologically progressive and sensitive to gender equality issues. This suggests that the perceived benefits of humor in reducing backlash are largely negated when it is intertwined with gender-based disparagement. Political strategists advising male candidates should therefore exercise extreme caution, recognizing that the potential for alienating key voter segments outweighs any perceived gains from such tactics [22]. Female candidates, conversely, face a uniquely complex strategic challenge. They must meticulously manage their public image to avoid activating negative gender stereotypes while simultaneously leveraging positive ones, such as being perceived as trustworthy, compassionate, or competent on "women's issues" like education and healthcare. This delicate balance requires strategic communication that navigates the "double bind" inherent in female political leadership. Furthermore, female candidates must be particularly cautious about displaying negative emotions in public, as such displays are often penalized by voters in ways that male politicians are not. Campaigns must fundamentally understand that humor is not a universally effective communication tool. Its impact is deeply intertwined with prevailing societal norms and the audience's perceptions of gender [23]. What one demographic perceives as amusing or harmless may be offensive and counterproductive to another, especially when gender is a salient factor. A nuanced understanding of audience segmentation and cultural context is therefore paramount for any campaign considering the use of humor, particularly in attack advertisements. The pervasive nature of gender stereotypes in media means that even subtle cues within humorous political advertisements can activate pre-existing biases in the audience [24]. This makes it challenging for campaigns to craft humor that is genuinely innocuous and avoids inadvertently reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The inherent ambiguity of humor, especially when it flirts with offensive content, further complicates its ethical deployment. The widespread defense of "just a joke" frequently trivializes the very real harm inflicted by sexist humor in political discourse. This rhetorical strategy contributes to a culture of inequality and objectification, diminishing the perceived severity of gender-based attacks. Such a defense not only undermines efforts to promote gender equality but also normalizes a hostile political environment for women, making them targets of personal attacks rather than being judged on their political merits. There is a clear ethical imperative for political communicators and media platforms to critically assess the potential ramifications of gendered humor in politics. This involves moving beyond a simplistic view of humor as mere entertainment and recognizing its capacity to reinforce harmful stereotypes, contribute to a hostile political environment for women, and ultimately undermine democratic discourse by shifting focus from substantive issues to personal, often gendered, attacks. Promoting media literacy among the electorate is also crucial to equip citizens with the tools to critically evaluate and resist the normalizing effects of gendered humorous content.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has thoroughly examined the moderating role of gender stereotypes in humorous political attack advertisements, demonstrating that while humor can be a powerful tool in political communication, its intersection with gender stereotypes introduces complex and often detrimental dynamics. The analysis has revealed that humor, when employed in political attacks, can enhance message accessibility, increase candidate likeability, and improve information retention, while also potentially reducing backlash for the attacker. However, these beneficial effects are significantly altered, and frequently reversed, when gender stereotypes are activated within the humorous content. Key insights from this study indicated that gender stereotypes profoundly shape the reception and impact of humorous political attacks. The application of Role Congruity Theory and Expectancy Violation Theory elucidates the unique challenges faced by female politicians, who navigate a "double bind" where both adherence to and deviation from traditional gender roles can lead to negative evaluations and heightened scrutiny. This makes female candidates particularly vulnerable to gendered humorous attacks, which often shift focus from their qualifications and policy positions to their appearance, emotional state, or domestic roles. Furthermore, the "just a joke" phenomenon, explained through Prejudiced Norm Theory, reveals how gendered humor contributes to the normalization of sexism in political discourse. This process desensitizes audiences to discriminatory content, making it socially acceptable and perpetuating harmful stereotypes, thereby hindering women's political participation and leadership. The evidence strongly suggests that male candidates who employ gender-stereotyped humor in attacks against female opponents are likely to experience significant backlash, underscoring the conditional and often counterproductive nature of such humor. The phenomenon of gender stereotypes moderating humorous political attack advertisements is far from a laughing matter. It carries serious implications for the integrity of democratic discourse and the advancement of gender equality in politics. The strategic deployment of humor in political campaigns must therefore be approached with a profound understanding of its potential to reinforce societal biases and undermine the legitimacy of female political actors. Future study should focus on quantifying the moderating effects of gender stereotypes on the reception of political humor, such as satire, slapstick, and irony. This will help understand which humorous tactics are most susceptible to gendered biases. Longitudinal studies should investigate the cumulative effects of prolonged exposure to gendered humorous political content on voter attitudes and the long-term normalization of sexism. Cross-cultural analysis is crucial to understand how the moderating role of gender stereotypes in humorous political attack advertisements varies across different political systems and cultural contexts. Study should also explore the effectiveness of counter-messaging strategies or media literacy interventions to mitigate the negative impacts of gendered humorous political attacks. Investigating the role of social media algorithms in amplifying or dampening the spread and impact of gendered humorous political content is essential to inform regulatory and platform design considerations.

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